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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**TITLE:**

**ROBERT E. LEE AS OPERATIONAL ARTIST DURING  
THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**AUTHOR:**

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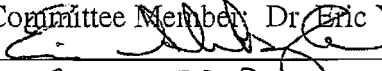
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## **Executive Summary**

**Title:**

**Author:** Major Andre M. Ingram, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** Despite his reputation and proven abilities, it could be argued that by taking his army into the North on two separate occasions, General Robert E. Lee exercised an erroneous operational art and may have hastened the downfall of the Confederacy.

**Discussion:** General Robert E. Lee is one of the most recognized leaders of the American Civil War. He led the Army of Northern Virginia during the pivotal months that separated the summers of 1862 and 1863. During this period the Confederacy achieved major tactical victories at Second Manassas and Chancellorsville that had strategic impacts. Both of these engagements occurred in the South where Lee enjoyed the advantages of knowledge of the terrain, interior lines of communication and popular support of the people. However, it was also during this time period that Lee and the leaders of the Confederacy chose to forfeit these advantages and pursue offensive campaigns that carried the Army of Northern Virginia north for engagements at Antietam and Gettysburg. Both of these engagements, seen by many as tactical defeats, significantly strained the South's logistics capabilities, had negative impacts on troop morale, and were counter to the strategic aims of the Confederacy. They were examples of operational art executed poorly. This study does not seek to examine either of these campaigns in detail. Rather it seeks to present them as examples of the importance of operational art and its connection to both the strategic and tactical levels of war.

**Conclusion:** Robert E. Lee's exercise of operational art, specifically his campaigns into Maryland and Pennsylvania, had impacts that hastened the downfall of the Confederacy. However, the blame is not his alone. The role that clearly articulated national aims play in the execution of operational art is crucial and cannot be underestimated.

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## *Preface*

The American Civil War is one of the most dynamic struggles that the world has ever seen. The future of a nation and a race of people depended on the outcome. My interest in this war began as a young boy living in Richmond, Virginia and has continued to grow over the years. In the time since my introduction to this conflict I have found that the Civil War has many layers, each of them feeding my desire to explore it more. This analysis is the product of the exploration of another layer. Specifically, it is an exploration and examination of General Robert E. Lee and the Confederacy's prosecution of the war during the months between the summers of 1862 and 1863.

The process of building this analysis was both exciting and difficult and I thank God for the strength to finish it. I would also like to thank Dr. Paul D. Gelpi, my research advisor. I am also grateful for the support provided by Ms. Rachel Kingcade and the research support staff of the Gray Research Center. Finally, I need to thank my wife and children for the patience and encouragement they freely gave as I worked to complete this study. I am proud of the journey, the struggle and the final product.



“Invincibility lies in the defense; the possibility of victory in the attack. One defends when his strength is inadequate; he attacks when it is abundant.”<sup>1</sup>

--Sun Tzu

## **Introduction**

The operational level of war has a host of definitions that even novice warfighters can understand. The term operational art found its birth during the years between World Wars I and II.<sup>2</sup> Russian and German planners were the first to realize that industrialization and the horizontal and vertical expansion of the battlefield, along with the growth and size of armies engaged on the field of battle required a new concept on which to build operational level plans.<sup>3</sup> U.S. Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, *Warfighting*, states that “the operational level of war links the strategic and tactical levels”<sup>4</sup> and concludes that

The operational level includes deciding when, where and under what conditions to refuse battle in support of higher aims. Actions at this level imply a broader dimension of time and space than actions at the tactical level. As strategy deals with winning wars and tactics with winning battles and engagements, the operational level of war is the art and science of winning campaigns. Its means are tactical results, and its ends are the established strategic objectives.<sup>5</sup>

The Marine Corps definition of the operational level of war serves two basic purposes. First, it enables modern military planners at the operational level to frame their actions so that the plans they design link the strategic and tactical levels of war. Second, it facilitates the use of military history to develop an understanding of past actions and decisions. The U.S. Army’s definition of operational art nests within the Marine Corps definition of the operational level of war. Army Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, states that “determines when, where, and for what purpose major forces are employed to influence the enemy disposition before combat.”<sup>6</sup>

The Marine Corps and Army definitions of operational art lead us to the purpose of this study. The American Civil War is dominated by a host of leaders whose decisions would be examined repeatedly in the decades that followed that struggle. Depending on the lens used, any

of the prominent leaders could be either lauded for their actions or scorned for their inaction. The purpose of this study is to examine Robert E. Lee as a practitioner of Operational Art. Lee, by an overwhelming number of accounts, was the premier military leader of the Civil War. It could be argued that his notoriety during the Civil War is only eclipsed by that of President Abraham Lincoln. It could also be argued that he was never out-thought by an opposing general on the battlefield. Despite his reputation and proven abilities, it could finally be argued that by taking his army into the North not once but twice, Lee exercised an erroneous operational art and may have hastened the downfall of the Confederacy. The Confederacy paid a tremendously high cost in personnel losses for the tactical stalemate at Antietam and the crushing loss at Gettysburg which turned the tide for the Union and marked the figurative and literal “high water mark” for the Confederacy.

Despite the fact that the term operational art did not exist during his tenure as Commanding General of the Army of Northern Virginia, the terms strategy and tactics did. Keeping in mind that operational art determines when, where and for what purpose to deploy forces, it may be asserted that Lee’s missteps at the operational level and his inability to reconcile the Confederacy’s strategic aims with both operational and tactical actions contributed to the defeat of the South.

## **Background**

The American Civil War began in the early morning hours of 12 April 1861 with the Confederate Naval bombardment of Fort Sumter in South Carolina. The secession of Virginia followed shortly thereafter and as the dominoes continued to fall both antagonists (Union and Confederacy) developed initial strategic aims. The Union and President Abraham Lincoln’s

initial aims were simple. Lincoln wanted to reunite the nation as quickly and as painlessly as possible, but after this policy of conciliation failed the President “opted for the unconditional surrender of the South as the only acceptable aim.”<sup>7</sup>

The South’s strategic aims were the converse of the North’s and were just as simple. The South needed to “preserve its newly declared independence” and “prevent the North from succeeding” in its reunification endeavor by making the cost of the war, both in men and materiel, more than the North was willing to pay.<sup>8</sup> The Confederacy could win “simply by not losing” and with a host of states seceding and the expanse of the Confederacy growing, that aim did not seem farfetched.<sup>9</sup> Further, for Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy, this strategic aim “quickly translated into a defensive posture, which allowed the superior forces of the North to ‘invade’ the South, where an ‘offensive defense’ allowed Confederate forces to attack and destroy the invaders. The Confederacy would fight the war on Southern soil.”<sup>10</sup>

Jefferson Davis was uniquely prepared to be Commander-in-Chief of the Confederacy during a time of war.<sup>11</sup> He graduated from the United States Military Academy the year before Joseph E. Johnston and Robert E. Lee.<sup>12</sup> The latter would become his greatest general and the former would be, arguably, his greatest antagonist. Aside from his service in the Mexican War, Davis’s career in the service would be considered honorable but without any defining activities.<sup>13</sup> He is defined most by his political career that began in Mississippi during the 1840s, just prior to his service in the Mexican war, and resumed in the 1850s when he served as secretary of war for President Franklin Pierce. When the Confederacy formed in 1861, “no other southerner matched Davis’s combination of political, administrative, and military experience.” He was, naturally, selected to be President of the Confederacy.<sup>14</sup> These unique qualifications may have given Davis a misguided sense of infallibility.

Early in the war this confidence created tension between Davis and Johnston. On several occasions, after Johnston assumed command of all Virginia forces, communication between the two was either adversarial in nature or non-existent. Much of the tension could be blamed on the idea that Johnston was just as arrogant as Davis. During his tenure as a student at the United States Military Academy Johnston earned the nickname "Colonel" from his peers because of his pompous behavior<sup>15</sup>, and during his career, prior to the Civil War, he repeatedly lobbied the War Department for increased responsibilities and promotion.<sup>16</sup> As the Civil War unfolded, Johnston maintained his aggressive pursuit of authority and eventually communication between him and his president was managed by two proxies; Samuel Cooper, Davis's adjutant and inspector general and Judah Benjamin, the Confederate Secretary of War.<sup>17</sup> As a consequence, when Johnston was wounded at the Battle of Seven Pines in 1862, Davis found it necessary and beneficial to replace him with Robert E. Lee.<sup>18</sup>

On 20 April, 1861, shortly after the secession of Virginia, Robert E. Lee, a war-tested experienced officer, resigned his commission and joined his home state.<sup>19</sup> In a letter to his sister near the time of his resignation Lee states:

We are now in a state of war which will yield to nothing. The whole south is in a state of revolution, into which Virginia, after a long struggle, has been drawn; and though I recognize no necessity for this state of things, and would have forborne and pleaded to the end for redress of grievances, real or supposed, yet in my own person I had to meet the question whether I should take part against my native state. With all my devotion to the Union, and the feeling of loyalty and duty of an American citizen, I have not been able to make up my mind to raise my hand against my relatives, my children, my home. I have therefore resigned my commission in the army, and, save in defense of my native state--with the sincere hope that my poor services may never be needed--I hope I may never be called upon to draw my sword.<sup>20</sup>

Lee's conviction to support his home state of Virginia in the coming war was clear but it was unclear whether he truly supported the cause of Confederacy. In a letter to his son prior to Virginia's secession from the union Lee states:

Secession is nothing but revolution. The framers of our Constitution never exhausted so much labor, wisdom and forbearance in its formation, and surrounded it with so many guards and securities, if it was intended to be broken by every member of the Confederacy at will. It was intended for "perpetual union," so expressed in the preamble, and for the establishment of a government, not a compact, which can only be dissolved by revolution, or the consent of all the people in convention assembled. It is idle talk of secession.<sup>21</sup>

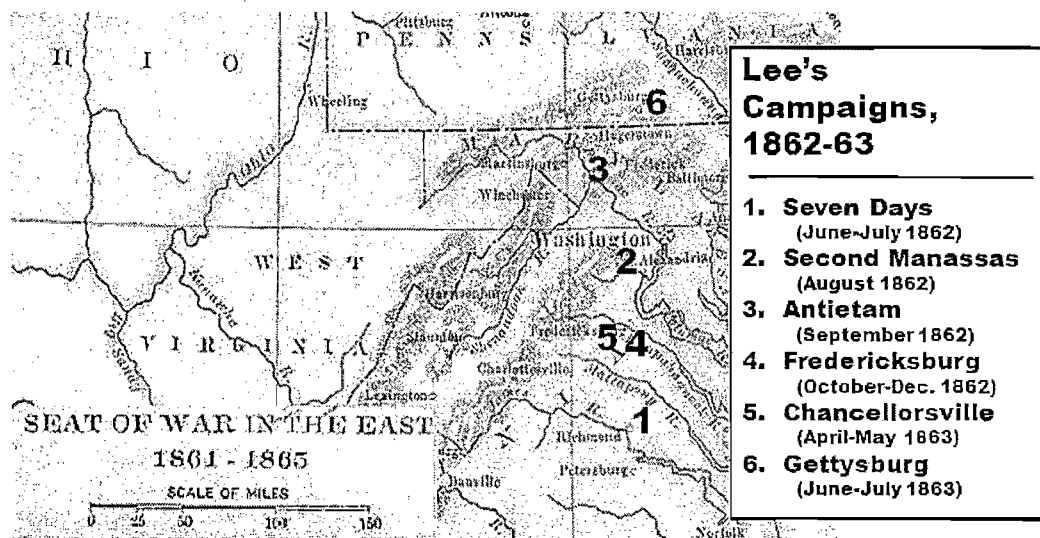
Lee was clearly convicted regarding his support for his home state but conflicted regarding its secession from the union. Further, he held out hope that war could be avoided. But who was Robert E. Lee and how did he become to be the Commanding General of the Army of Northern Virginia?

Robert E. Lee was born on January 19, 1807 at his family home, *Stratford Hall*, in Westmorland County, Virginia.<sup>22</sup> His father was 'Light Horse' Harry Lee, a hero of the American Revolutionary War, and Lee, no doubt, measured himself throughout his life by his father's reputation.<sup>23</sup> In 1825 Lee received an appointment to the United States Military Academy where he began an academic study that was unrivaled.<sup>24</sup> While there, he conducted himself with such repute that in his four years he never received a demerit and graduated in 1829, second in his class.<sup>25</sup>

In 1846, during the Mexican War, he served with great distinction under General Winfield Scott. Scott recognized his military acumen and stated, "R. E. Lee is the greatest soldier now living and...will prove himself the great captain of history."<sup>26</sup> In 1852, Lee returned to the United States Military Academy as superintendent.<sup>27</sup> It was during this period that Lee further developed his understanding and knowledge of military tactics and strategy. Additionally, "He [Lee] read widely on geography, military biography, history, and the science of war. He developed a special interest in Napoleon's campaigns, and the books he is known to

have checked out from the West Point library probably contributed more to his military education than any other experience.”<sup>28</sup>

Lee, like many of his contemporaries, could be accused of being a disciple of Napoleon and a student of Napoleonic warfare. “When he [Lee] analyzed a Napoleonic campaign he would have tried to understand Napoleon’s motives and reasoning process, asking what were the options and why Napoleon did not choose another...It may be no coincidence that when Lee established the army corps it looked much like Napoleon’s...and he used it in much the same way.”<sup>29</sup> In this we can see that Lee’s views of warfare and force employment could be characterized as Napoleonic. This may lead him to seek a type of engagement in which his massed forces met their enemy at a decisive point for a grand victory. These views would come to play a major role in the campaigns that Lee would lead during the Civil War. Particularly those conducted from the summers of 1862 to 1863, as outlined below in figure 1.



(Figure 1)<sup>30</sup>

Up to his appointment as Commander of Confederate Forces East in 1862, Lee, as Davis’s general-in-chief and primary military advisor, had proven himself to be “tactful, courteous, and a pleasure to work with” and he had developed a solid reputation that was built on both his most recent service to the Confederacy and his prior service under Winfield Scott.<sup>31</sup>

Lee's reputation would inform not only the communication that would develop between him and the Confederate Command-in-Chief but also the freedom of operations and command that Davis afforded Lee throughout the war; a freedom that would allow Lee to operate without question.

Unlike Johnston, Lee communicated quite well with Jefferson Davis. In fact, he communicated with him via letter or telegram nearly one-hundred times between the summers of 1862 and 1863. These pieces of communication are captured in Dowdy and Manarin's collection, *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*. In these letters and telegrams Lee used a tone that was nothing short of cordial and each correspondence is very detailed in nature. Lee's meticulous style of communication marked a stark contrast to what Davis was used to receiving from his generals. There appears to be no doubt that this satisfied Davis's desire to be involved in the details of operations, but it may have created negative impacts that will be discussed later.

## **Discussion**

Carl Von Clausewitz's *On War* was first published in 1832 and was first translated into English in 1874.<sup>32</sup> The American Civil War precedes this translation but the theories upon which it was developed were tested and based upon the Napoleonic era of warfare. In his writing, Clausewitz provides a strong definition of the defense. He starts Book Six of his *On War* with the question: "What is the concept of defense?"<sup>33</sup> "It is the parrying of a blow" and its characteristic feature is that of awaiting the blow.<sup>34</sup> Clausewitz goes on to state that the object of the defense is preservation and because "it is easier to hold ground than to take it...it follows that defense is easier than attack..."<sup>35</sup> Clausewitz amplifies this assertion by stating,

"[The] defense has a passive purpose: preservation; and attack a positive one: conquest. The latter increases one's own capacity to wage war; the former does not. So in order to state the relationship precisely, we must say that the defensive form of warfare is intrinsically stronger than the offensive."<sup>36</sup>

However, for the purposes of this analysis it is not enough to state that the defense is stronger than the offense and that it should have been the exclusive form of warfare used by the Confederacy. It would be more appropriate to present an alternative.

An alternative posture for the Confederacy, that is defensive in its nature, is explained in the writings of Clausewitz. He states that an army that has been ordered to defend its theater of operations can accomplish that mission in one of four ways:

1. It can attack the enemy the moment he invades its theater of operations.
2. It can take up position near the frontier, wait until the enemy appears and is about to attack, and then attack him first.
3. It can wait, not merely for the enemy's decision to attack—that is, his appearance in full view of the position—but also for the actual attack.
4. It can withdraw to the interior of the country and resist there. The purpose of the withdrawal is to weaken the attack to such an extent that one can wait for him to break off his advance of his own accord, or be too weak to overcome the resistance with which he will eventually be confronted.<sup>37</sup>

One of the South's strongest advocates for a defensive posture was its Commander-in-Chief, Jefferson Davis.

Confederate President Jefferson Davis made his first address to the Confederate Congress in 1861, shortly after hostilities began. There he stated: "We seek no conquest, no aggrandizement, no concession of any kind from the States with which we were lately confederated; all we ask is to be left alone."<sup>38</sup> This strategy could be characterized as defensive and was quite appropriate considering the fact that at the outset of the war the Confederacy was "in firm control of nearly all the territory it claimed"; nearly "750,000 square miles in which not a single enemy soldier was to be found..."<sup>39</sup> The Confederates did not have to fight to gain control of either territory or government they only had to defend what they already had.<sup>40</sup> This point is appropriately summed by J.F.C. Fuller in his book titled *Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship*. In it, he states:



What were the problems which now faced the contending parties [Union and Confederacy]? In themselves they were exceedingly simple: to re-establish the Union the North must conquer the South; and to maintain the Confederacy, and all that the Confederacy stood for, the South must resist invasion. On the one side the problem was offensive, on the other defensive. To conquer the North was out of the question...<sup>41</sup>

However, the forces of the Confederacy were not large enough to defend every possible area.

Despite that, the Confederate government was obliged to attempt to provide a blanket of security similar to that provided by Washington prior to secession.<sup>42</sup> The only way to protect the land was to employ an offensive-defensive strategy.

The offensive-defensive strategy's strongest advocate was Robert E. Lee.<sup>43</sup> This strategy was based on the premise that the Confederacy could choose the time, place, and circumstances of battle.<sup>44</sup> In essence the South would take the offensive only when it was advantageous. Further, this would afford them the time needed to muster and shift forces to a specific location and mount operations despite inferior personnel strength.<sup>45</sup> This appears to be a sound employment of an operational art that achieves a clearly outlined national strategy. As it turned out, during the initial stages of the war this technique worked well. It must be stated however, that it was helped by the gross passivity displayed by military leaders of the Union. However, as the war continued to develop it appears as if Lee moved away from the offensive-defensive strategy and adopted a purely offensive technique at which point the operational art that he employed departed from the strategic aims of the Confederacy. This is evident in both of Lee's northern campaigns; Antietam and Gettysburg.

To understand Lee's employment of operational art with regard to his campaigns in the North, one must first touch on the results of the Second Battle of Bull Run, known in the south as Second Manassas. This battle took place from 28 to 30 August, 1862.<sup>46</sup> As in most cases during the Civil War, the Confederacy came to the field of battle sorely outnumbered: Union forces

totaled over 75,000 while Confederate forces totaled nearly 48,000.<sup>47</sup> Despite smaller numbers and due in some part to Union commander Major General John Pope's ineptness, Lee won a resounding victory. This set the stage for the Confederacy's first sojourn into Union territory.

### **The Antietam Campaign**

Lee initiated the Maryland Campaign with a letter written to Jefferson Davis on 3 September, 1862. In this letter, Lee states, "The present seems to be the most propitious time since the commencement of the war for the Confederate Army to enter Maryland."<sup>48</sup> History has shown that Lee's intent was clear but in this letter, a campaign into the North is only presented as a course of action. Lee goes on in his letter to outline for Davis what effect a Confederate move in to the North may have on Union forces and specifically addresses what he knows is Davis's major concern, the defense of Richmond. Lee closes the letter with the flattering and reoccurring valediction "I have the honor to be with high respect, your ob't [sic] servant."<sup>49</sup> Jefferson Davis does nothing in response in spite of the fact that Lee's aggressive posture was not consistent with the president's own defensive approach to the war.<sup>50</sup>

Jefferson Davis emphasized a defensive posture and strongly believed that the will of the Confederate people would outlast that of their enemy's. With that in mind, Davis espoused a policy of conserving both men and materiel and sought to avoid risks that might lead to the significant loss of either.<sup>51</sup> Yet, he did not reply to either Lee's letter of 3 September or the letters that arrived from Lee on subsequent days as Lee continued to develop his offensive posture.<sup>52</sup> Davis's silence did two things. First from a positive perspective, Davis demonstrated a level of confidence in Lee that he had not shown previous subordinate leaders. Lee had certainly earned it based on his reputation and performance at Second Manassas and during his tenure as Davis's lead military advisor. However, Davis's confidence demonstrated through his

silence leads to a second more negative outcome. It allowed Lee to initiate and execute his Maryland Campaign with no input from his Commander-in-Chief. Davis missed an opportunity to ensure that operations effectively reconciled strategic aims. When Davis finally communicated directly with Lee, the Army of Northern Virginia had already crossed the Potomac River into Maryland.

Confederate forces entered Maryland in September of 1862 and carried with them an air of invincibility supported by their most recent victory at Manassas.<sup>53</sup> However, the truth was, these forces were “poorly clothed, badly equipped, short on supplies, lacked proper transportation, and was underfed.”<sup>54</sup> Based on these logistical shortfalls, it seems that the Army of Northern Virginia was making nothing less than a poor decision to stretch its lines of communication and potentially further reduce its logistics capability. Upon a closer look however, three reasons for a Confederate attack into the Union come to light.

The first purpose of an offensive into the north is captured in an article written by Jared Sutton titled *Sharpsburg: 17 September 1862*. The article states:

Lee’s success at Second Manassas created a windfall morale of and pride in the Confederate military. What better time to invade the enemy’s home than when he had been decisively defeated abroad? Such an invasion of the Union would also relieve northern Virginia where much of the fighting had been conducted thus far. There was also the belief among Confederate leaders that the Union did not have the will to carry out a prolonged destructive war. If the Confederacy could invade the North and place the burden of war on the Federal territories, the Union’s will to fight would fall and the Confederacy could win independence.<sup>55</sup>

The second purpose for a northern offensive was political in its grounding. A strong sense of state’s rights existed in the boarder state of Maryland.<sup>56</sup> This is the same conviction that drove South Carolina to secede a year earlier. The feeling was so strong that early in the war Union troops were deployed throughout the state to prevent its secession.<sup>57</sup> If Maryland had seceded the Union capital in Washington, D.C. would have been isolated from the rest of the

Union and pinned along the border of two Confederate states (Maryland and Virginia). Lee thought that this political ambiguity would allow him to enter the state and raise local support for the cause of the Confederacy. This may then encourage the state to more aggressively pursue secession.<sup>58</sup>

The third and final consideration for embarking on an attack of northern territory had to do with international recognition. For a major portion of the war the Confederacy actively sought recognition of sovereignty from both England and France and a victory on northern soil may further legitimize the Confederacy's aim and strengthen their claim.<sup>59</sup> Further, European involvement would not only guarantee political strength but may also include materiel support as well.

As stated earlier the Battle of Antietam, despite the Union's numerical advantage, was a tactical draw. Stephen Sears famous book *Landscape Turned Red* is appropriately titled as Union forces suffered more killed, lost, or wounded than the Confederacy, and the two combined for nearly 23,000 casualties making 17 September, 1862 the bloodiest day in American history.<sup>60</sup> The impact of such personnel losses affected the Confederacy much more than it did the Union. Aside from the loss of troops, the Confederacy lost nine generals; seasoned combat leaders that would be near impossible to replace and would have obvious impacts on future operations.<sup>61</sup> Further, the Confederacy did not accomplish any of the major strategic objectives that were framed by the campaign.

Lee did succeed in relieving the logistical strain that had been placed on the South, specifically the state of Virginia. This was capped by the seizure of the Union supply depot at Harper's Ferry.<sup>62</sup> However, with regard to the other objectives, the Confederate failings resulted in huge strategic impacts. First, "Lee had miscalculated western Maryland's support: Southern

sympathizers were primarily in Baltimore, southern Maryland, near the capital city of Annapolis, and in eastern Maryland.”<sup>63</sup> The citizens of western Maryland, even those that may have been Confederate sympathizers, were surely unimpressed and uninspired to side with the South when they saw “ragged, underfed, and poorly supplied soldiers” on their land.<sup>64</sup> This sight certainly did not give them confidence that the South could win the war against the Union.

Second, the resulting stalemate of the battle gave the Union and President Lincoln the opening he needed to publish the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>65</sup> The power of the proclamation was twofold. First, it changed the Union’s major strategic aim of Union preservation to one of antislavery and in essence, crushed any chance that the Confederacy might rejoin the Union in its pre-war state. Second, politically, the Confederacy was marginalized in the eyes of the international community. “After the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, any nation providing support to the Confederacy was endorsing slavery.”<sup>66</sup>

Both the British and the French had abolished slavery years before the outbreak of the Civil War,<sup>67</sup> and the British were actively engaged in anti-slavery operations in Africa.<sup>68</sup> With these facts in place, neither nation was willing to sully its reputation by aligning with the Confederacy. Based on this alone, Lee’s hope that these nations would align with the Confederacy, either before or after Antietam, can be considered misguided at best. In the final analysis of the Battle of Antietam, the Confederate strategic ends could not be justified by the sacrifice of precious means (troops and materiel). Put another way, Lee’s offensive minded operational art did not appear to be in concert with the strategic aims of the Confederacy.

Following Antietam, the Battle of Chancellorsville, occurring 1-3 May, 1863, marked the next crucial engagement of the Civil War. As identified by Stephen Sears in his book *Chancellorsville*, this battle was “the most remarkable of Robert E. Lee’s victories...”<sup>69</sup> Sears’s

thought is amplified by Luvaas when he states, “Lee although outnumbered nearly two to one in the theater of operations, utilized superior intelligence and knowledge of the ground, skilled use of field fortifications, and constant movement along interior lines to outmaneuver superior numbers...” He goes on to state poignantly that “Chancellorsville was won at the operational level.”<sup>70</sup>

These statements articulate Lee’s use of advantages that he either did not have or could not develop during the Battle of Antietam; specifically interior lines of communication, detailed knowledge of the field of battle and field fortifications. Chancellorsville was capped by tactical brilliance as well; specifically the movement of Stonewall Jackson’s corps fourteen miles “across the front and around the flank of the enemy” to launch a surprise attack.<sup>71</sup> After the resounding Confederate success at the Battle of Chancellorsville, Lee put into motion his plan to invade the north for a second time.

### **The Gettysburg Campaign**

Lee’s decision to take his army north for the second time was not made as hastily as the Antietam decision nor was his communication with Davis left to letters or telegrams. In February of 1863 he commissioned his best topographical engineer to provide him a map of the Shenandoah Valley as it stretched from western Virginia and opened in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania<sup>72</sup>, and in May Lee met with Davis and his cabinet for a day of debate and deliberation after which he received approval for his second northern campaign.<sup>73</sup> Despite giving his approval, Davis harbored reservations about the decision. In his home state of Mississippi, the Confederate fort at Vicksburg on the Mississippi River was under siege. General John C. Pemberton, commander of Confederate forces at Vicksburg, was in desperate need of troops to reinforce his defensive lines. Davis met with his cabinet and considered

allocating forces from the Army of Northern Virginia to support operations in Mississippi, but based on their previous commitment to Lee the cabinet decided against it.<sup>74</sup>

Lee's army began its movement into the Shenandoah Valley in early June of 1863. During this time Lee stayed in close communication Davis and members of the president's Cabinet, specifically Secretary of War James A. Seddon. In a letter to Davis on June 7th and another to Seddon on June 8th, Lee proposed a repositioning of Confederate forces in southeastern Virginia and North Carolina so that they might better support his operation into the North. In the letter, Lee tells Seddon, "I think our southern coast might be held during the sickly season by local troops aided by a small organized force, and the predatory excursions of the enemy be repressed."<sup>75</sup> Lee implies that substantial forces may not be required to defend these areas. He goes on to augment this thought by stating that the reapportionment of forces,

"...would give us an active force in the field with which we might hope to make some impression on the enemy, both on our northern & western frontiers. Unless this can be done, I see little hope of accomplishing anything of importance. All our military preparations and organizations should now be pressed forward with the greatest vigor, and every exertion made to obtain some material advantage in this campaign."<sup>76</sup>

Jefferson Davis denied Lee's request for more troops to support his campaign stating, "It has been an effort with me to answer the clamor to have troops stopped or recalled, to protect the...railroads communicating with your army. Do not understand me as balancing accounts in the matter of brigades; I only repeat that I have not many to send you..."<sup>77</sup>

For the first time since Lee took command of the Army of Northern Virginia, he was not able to induce Davis to support his every action. Davis's decision can be looked at from two perspectives using contemporary terms. He either failed to weight his main effort or effectively avoided the reinforcement of failure. Either way, Lee deployed a force that was smaller than he needed to succeed but as large as the Confederacy could afford.

Robert E. Lee's second movement into Union territory set up what Steven Woodworth calls "an all-out end-the-war gamble."<sup>78</sup> However, on the surface, Lee's reasons for this movement do not appear so terminal. At this stage in the Civil War the vast majority of battles were fought in the south and the logistical strain that the land and the people of the Confederacy were bearing was significant. Wisloski captures Lee's purposes for his second offensive in the north by quoting the general. Lee states:

An invasion of the enemy's country breaks up all his preconceived plans, relieves our counter of his presence, and we subsist while there on his resources. The question of food for this army gives me more trouble and uneasiness than everything else combined; the absence of the army from Virginia gives our people an opportunity to collect supplies ahead.<sup>79</sup>

Lee also held out the hope, as he did earlier at Antietam, that a victory in the North would cause the Union to be pressured politically to move toward a peaceful settlement of the conflict.<sup>80</sup>

The Confederacy was able to use the Shenandoah Valley to move the Army of Northern Virginia into Pennsylvania virtually un-harassed.<sup>81</sup> This move was matched by Joseph Hooker, Commander of the Army of the Potomac, when he deployed his army to Fredrick City, Maryland. Shortly after his arrival, Hooker resigned his command and was replaced by General George Meade with orders to "move on Harrisburg and deliver battle with the enemy wherever met."<sup>82</sup> That meeting occurred at Gettysburg on 1 July, 1863.

As with most engagements of the war, the Confederate forces were undermanned when compared to their adversary; Lee had a force that totaled roughly 75,000 and Meade's force totaled nearly 94,000.<sup>83</sup> As a result of an initial engagement that occurred northwest of the town of Gettysburg, Confederate forces pushed elements of the Union through the town of Gettysburg where they established defensive positions on the high ground that existed south of the town.<sup>84</sup> Despite the fact that the Confederacy had taken the initiative and enjoyed a tactical advantage



during its early stages, the Battle of Gettysburg did not develop in a way that favored the Confederacy, as many previous battles had. Also, the death of “Stonewall” Jackson at Chancellorsville had deprived Lee of one of his strongest subordinate leaders. With the appointment of General Richard Ewell as heir to Jackson’s corps, Lee gained a subordinate commander that could not discern commander’s intent from the “discretionary” type orders that Lee was used to issuing.<sup>85</sup> Lee’s order to Ewell to seize a piece of key terrain “if practicable” resulted in inaction by Ewell that allowed the Union to strengthen and consolidate its defensive positions.<sup>86</sup> In turn, the advantage of initiative the Confederacy typically held was lost.

Over the next two days of battle, Union forces were able to effectively repel a host of Confederate offensive actions. Meade accomplished this by moving forces within his defensive perimeter to reinforce the line as the Confederates attacked.<sup>87</sup> The battle culminated with the disastrous frontal assault by Confederate troops against the Union line known as Pickett’s charge where it is estimated that over half of the 13,000 troops that began the charge became casualties.<sup>88</sup> The battle resulted in losses for both Union and Confederate forces that nearly reached 45,000 with Lee losing the majority.<sup>89</sup>

As Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia limped south and crossed the Potomac River into Virginia the true measure of the Confederate loss at Gettysburg came to light. A once very confident force was quite dejected. Among Lee’s troops “there was widespread agreement that invading the enemy’s country was not a very good idea.”<sup>90</sup> Further, “Nothing had come of it the previous September, [referencing the Battle of Antietam] and this latest invasion proved to be no different.”<sup>91</sup> Confederate personnel losses at Gettysburg reached nearly 28,000 and included some of the Confederacy’s key leaders. In fact “Of the officers heading the army’s forty-six divisional and brigade infantry commands...nineteen were casualties.”<sup>92</sup>

Lee was able to accomplish most of the goals that he set out to achieve with the Gettysburg campaign. "Virginia has been freed of Yankee occupation...and his [Lee's] army was subsisted by the enemy (and then some) for a month; and whatever plans the Yankees might have had for a summer offensive were interrupted."<sup>93</sup> However, the main objective—to win a major battle on northern soil—failed miserably.<sup>94</sup> It is prudent to again reflect on the idea that the Confederacy did not have to win the war; they only had to not lose it. The defeat at Gettysburg, coupled with the stalemate at Antietam, and the implications of the significant loss of man and materiel in both battles draw into question the operational art employed by Lee. These failures sealed the fate of the Confederacy and although the war carried on for another two years the Confederacy would never recover. With that said there is a course of action that Lee might have taken that was supported by many in the Confederacy and may have prolonged the war and allowed the south to achieve some its strategic aims.

"...Genl. [sic] Lee can whip with this army double as many Yankees in Virg. as he can in Penn. Better prolong the war by defending then ruin ourselves by failures at invasion."<sup>95</sup> The preceding quote was written by Colonel David Aiken of the 7th South Carolina in a letter to his wife just after the Battle of Gettysburg. It captures how many in the Confederacy believed the war should have been prosecuted from the very beginning. The key word in Colonel Aiken's letter is 'defense'.

As the war unfolded Lee stretched his own lines of communication and forfeited the advantage of interior lines of communication by going on the offensive in his pursuit of a Napoleonic battle. Despite the fact that the engagement at Antietam was considered a draw, the losses for the Confederacy had a greater impact that they would never make up. Lee's offensive posture considering the restraints of the Confederacy seems inappropriate. Russell Weigley

states, "For a belligerent with limited manpower resources of the Confederacy, General Lee's dedication to an offensive strategy was at best questionable".<sup>96</sup> It seems natural that Lee would have gained experience from the loss of men and materiel at Antietam and reverted to either his offensive-defensive strategy or a pure defensive one. However, he went on the offensive again, this time at Gettysburg, and suffered a crippling loss. This decision sealed the fate of the Confederacy.

Lee and the Confederacy would have been better served by operational art techniques that were more defensive in their characteristics. This technique was applied to good effect by Joseph Johnston. During the spring and summer of 1864, while in command of the Army of Tennessee, Johnston "fought a war of defensive maneuver."<sup>97</sup> Weigley states:

"[Johnston took] opportunities to fall upon enemy detachments which might expose themselves and inviting the enemy to provide him with such openings, meanwhile moving from one strong defensive position to another in order to invite the enemy to squander his resources in frontal attacks, but never remaining stationary long enough to risk being outflanked or entrapped."<sup>98</sup>

Through these actions Johnston was able to delay one of the Union's best leaders, General William T. Sherman, into consuming "seventy-four days in advancing a hundred miles" while holding his own casualties to a minimum.<sup>99</sup> Johnston's tactics were endorsed by Ulysses S. Grant, Commanding General of Union Armies, when he stated, "For my own part, I think that Johnston's tactics were right. Anything that could have prolonged the war a year beyond the time that it did finally close, would probably have exhausted the North to such an extent that they might have abandoned the contest and agreed to a separation."<sup>100</sup>

Had Lee employed similar tactics he may have been able to achieve exactly what Grant stated and in the process preserve the strategic aims of the Confederacy. However, based on Lee's affinity for his home state it is likely that he would have prevented it from falling into

enemy hands at any cost. His desire to liberate Virginia of Union troops caused him to take the Army of Northern Virginia into the north not once but twice. Further, Lee's letters and telegrams clearly demonstrate that he was a southern gentlemen and unashamed servant of the Confederacy. However, they also reveal Lee's ability to charm Davis. The communications not only satisfy Davis's desire for detail but they also pacify him and allow Lee to employ an operational art that was counter to the strategic aims of the Confederacy.

## **Conclusion**

What can modern operational artists learn from the experience of Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and the Confederacy during the Civil War? If one accepts the premise that operational art is the reconciliation tool that connects strategy and tactics, then the ability to master operational art and design is invaluable. The current operational environment in which our nation is involved requires us to be particularly cognizant of our force employment. Today's battlefields have the potential to span hundreds of miles with lines of operation that are not only physical but ideological. Further, technology has given us the ability to connect general officers directly to small unit leaders employed on the battlefield. All of these facts illustrate the idea that strategic and national aims are more closely connected to tactical action than ever. However, this smaller gap counter intuitively demands a greater ability to grasp the when, where, and for what purpose our forces are employed so that the reconciliation of strategic means and tactical ends occurs. When applied in retrospect the very same is true.

The strategic aims of the South were clearly delineated. On more than one occasion, Robert E. Lee was able to create tactical victories with forces that were outmatched on the battlefield. With victories at Second Manassas and Chancellorsville, as well as faltering support

for the war in the North, Lee's reasons for taking the war to the Union are understandable yet incompatible with the strategic aims of the south. Based on his study of Napoleonic warfare, Lee could be accused of being Jominian--in reference to Antoine Henri Jomini--in that he actively sought a grand engagement that would end the war. However, the Confederacy may have been better served by employing a purely defensive form of warfare, even if that meant trading space for time. In other words the south could have sacrificed some of its territory, specifically Virginia, in an effort to protract the war, stretch the Union's lines of communication and over time wear away at the resolve of the people of the north.

However, the fate of the Confederacy cannot lie only at the feet of Robert E. Lee. Jefferson Davis, as Command-in-Chief of the South deserves a fair portion of the responsibility. In his role as President of the Confederacy he had an obligation to first, identify and clearly articulate the strategic aims of the Confederacy as he viewed them. After the aims were issued he then had the duty to ensure that his combat commanders were keeping the South's strategic aims in perspective as they prosecuted their campaign design through operational and tactical action. Further, Davis had the responsibility of ensuring the security of the entire Confederacy. By allowing Lee to take the Army of Northern Virginia into Union territory Davis acted counter to his ideas regarding the prosecution of the war and he failed to defend the Confederacy with its strongest asset. Davis had only to examine his counter-part to understand his role and responsibilities. Union President, Abraham Lincoln was not without fault but he did give his generals specific guidance and held them accountable when they failed to carry it out.

Jefferson Davis missed more than one opportunity to provide Lee specific guidance that matched his view on how the war should be prosecuted. Instead of being a Commander-in-Chief, notwithstanding Lee's success, Davis allowed his general to make operational decisions

that were too ambitious for either his comfort or the Confederacy's capabilities. The most detrimental manifestations of these decisions were the Battles of Antietam and Gettysburg. These two campaigns were poor exercises of operational art and hastened the downfall of the Confederacy.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Methany, "The Roots of Modern American Operational Art", 19.

[http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army-usawc/modern\\_operations.pdf](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army-usawc/modern_operations.pdf). (Accessed December 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Methany, pg 1.

<sup>4</sup> Headquarters Marine Corps, *Warfighting*, MCDP 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Marine Corps, June 20, 1997), 30.

<sup>5</sup> MCDP 1, pg 30.

<sup>6</sup> Headquarters United States Army, *Operations*, FM 3-0 (Washington, DC: U.S. Army, June 14, 2001), 2-3.

<sup>7</sup> Headquarters Marine Corps, *Campaigning*, MCDP 1-2 (Washington, DC: U.S. Marine Corps, August 1, 1997), 21.

<sup>8</sup> Emory M. Thomas, "Davis, Lee, and Confederate Grand Strategy," *Jefferson Davis's Generals*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 32.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, pg 32

<sup>10</sup> Michael Wisloski, Jr., "Robert E. Lee and Lessons From the Gettysburg Campaign", *Marine Corps Gazette* 75, no. 1 (January 1991): pg 74.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Constitution OnLine, *Constitution of the Confederate States of America*,

<http://www.usconstitution.net/csa.html>, (Accessed January 2010). Article 2, Section 2 of the Confederate Constitution states "The President shall be Commander-in-Chief of the Army and

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Navy of the Confederate States, and of the militia of the several States, when called into the actual service of the Confederate States...”

<sup>12</sup> Craig L. Symonds, “A Fatal Relationship: Davis and Johnston at War”, *Jefferson Davis’s Generals*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Woodworth, pg 5-6.

<sup>14</sup> Woodworth, pg 6.

<sup>15</sup> Woodworth, pg 17.

<sup>16</sup> Woodworth, pg 18.

<sup>17</sup> Woodworth, pgs 11 & 62.

<sup>18</sup> Woodworth, pg 148.

<sup>19</sup> Evisum Incorporated, *Robert E. Lee*, <http://www.roborteleee.org/>, (Accessed January 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Evisum, <http://www.roborteleee.org/>.

<sup>21</sup> Woodworth, pg 14-15.

<sup>22</sup> Major General J.F.C. Fuller, *Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1957), pg 100.

<sup>23</sup> Evisum, <http://www.roborteleee.org/>.

<sup>24</sup> Donna E. Lusitana (Director), *Civil War Journal: The Commanders*, Documentary DVD, United States: History Channel Studios, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> Lusitana, *Civil War Journal: The Commanders*.

<sup>26</sup> Lusitana, *Civil War Journal: The Commanders*.

<sup>27</sup> Lusitana, *Civil War Journal: The Commanders*.

<sup>28</sup> Jay Luvaas, “Lee and the Operational Art: The Right Place, The Right Time.” *Parameters* 23, no. 3 (Autumn 1992): pg 13.



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<sup>29</sup> Luvaas, pg 13-14.

<sup>30</sup> Luvaas, pg 9.

<sup>31</sup> Woodworth, pg 148.

<sup>32</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), xi.

<sup>33</sup> Clausewitz, pg 357.

<sup>34</sup> Clausewitz, pg 357.

<sup>35</sup> Clausewitz, pg 357.

<sup>36</sup> Clausewitz, pg 358.

<sup>37</sup> Clausewitz, pg 380-81.

<sup>38</sup> James M. McPherson, "Was the Best Defense a Good Offense? Jefferson Davis and Confederate Strategies", *Jefferson Davis's Generals*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 162.

<sup>39</sup> McPherson, pg 162.

<sup>40</sup> McPherson, pg 162.

<sup>41</sup> Fuller, pg 31.

<sup>42</sup> Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973) 96-97.

<sup>43</sup> Weigley, pg 97.

<sup>44</sup> Weigley, pg 97.

<sup>45</sup> Weigley, pg 97.

<sup>46</sup> Luvaas, pg 8.

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<sup>47</sup> United States Army Center of Military History, *Second Manassas Order of Battle*, <http://www.history.army.mil/books/staff-rides/2manassas/2mns-ob.htm>. (Accessed December 2009).

<sup>48</sup> Clifford Dowdey and Louis H. Manarin, eds., *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee* (New York, NY: Bram hall House, 1961), Lee to Davis, Near Dranesville, September 3, 1862, in 292-294.

<sup>49</sup> Lee to Davis, Dowdey and Manarin, pgs 294-295.

<sup>50</sup> Woodworth, pg 185.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas, pg 32.

<sup>52</sup> Dowdey and Manarin, pgs 294-298 & Woodworth, pgs 185-186.

<sup>53</sup> Major William T. Gillespie, Jr., "Logistics and Lee's Antietam Campaign, *Army Logistician* 35, no. 1 (Jan-Feb 2003): pg 37.

<sup>54</sup> Jared Sutton, "Sharpsburg: 17 September 1862", *Armor* 112, no. 1 (January-February 2003): pg 26.

<sup>55</sup> Sutton, pg 26.

<sup>56</sup> Sutton, pg 26.

<sup>57</sup> Sutton, pg 26.

<sup>58</sup> Sutton, pg 26.

<sup>59</sup> Sutton, pg 26.

<sup>60</sup> Washington Educational Television Association, *The War: The Crossroads of our Being*, <http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/war/facts.html>, (Accessed November 2009).

<sup>61</sup> Gillespie, pg 39.

<sup>62</sup> Gillespie, Pg 39.

<sup>63</sup> Gillespie, pg 38.

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- <sup>64</sup> Gillespie, pg 38.
- <sup>65</sup> Sutton, pg 29.
- <sup>66</sup> Sutton, pg 30.
- <sup>67</sup> Gillespie, pg 39.
- <sup>68</sup> Sutton, pg 30.
- <sup>69</sup> Stephen W. Sears, *Chancellorsville*, (New York, NY: Houthton Mifflin Company, 1996), ix.
- <sup>70</sup> Luvass, pg 10.
- <sup>71</sup> Luvass, pg 11.
- <sup>72</sup> Luvaas, pg 3.
- <sup>73</sup> Woodworth, pg 231
- <sup>74</sup> Woodworth, pg 232-233.
- <sup>75</sup> Dowdey and Manari, Lee to Seddon, June 8, 1863, pgs 504-505.
- <sup>76</sup> Dowdey and Manari, Lee to Seddon, June 8, 1863, pgs 504-505.
- <sup>77</sup> Woodworth, pg 240.
- <sup>78</sup> Woodworth, pg 239.
- <sup>79</sup> Wiskloski, pg 76.
- <sup>80</sup> Wiskloski, pg 76.
- <sup>81</sup> Fuller, pg 194.
- <sup>82</sup> Fuller, pg 196.
- <sup>83</sup> Edwin Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command*, (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1964), 250.
- <sup>84</sup> Fuller, pg 196.
- <sup>85</sup> Luvaas, pg 6.

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<sup>86</sup> Luvaas, pg 5.

<sup>87</sup> Harry W. Franz, *The Battle of Gettysburg*, (Fort Washington, PA: Eastern National, 1994), pg 25.

<sup>88</sup> Stephen W. Sears, *Gettysburg*, (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 468.

<sup>89</sup> Sears, pg 513.

<sup>90</sup> Sears, pg 499.

<sup>91</sup> Sears, pg 499.

<sup>92</sup> Sears, pg 498.

<sup>93</sup> Sears, pg 498.

<sup>94</sup> Sears, pg 498.

<sup>95</sup> Sears, pg 499.

<sup>96</sup> Weigley, pg 118.

<sup>97</sup> Weigley, pg 123.

<sup>98</sup> Weigley, pg 123.

<sup>99</sup> Weigley, pg 123.

<sup>100</sup> MCDP 1-2, pg 29.

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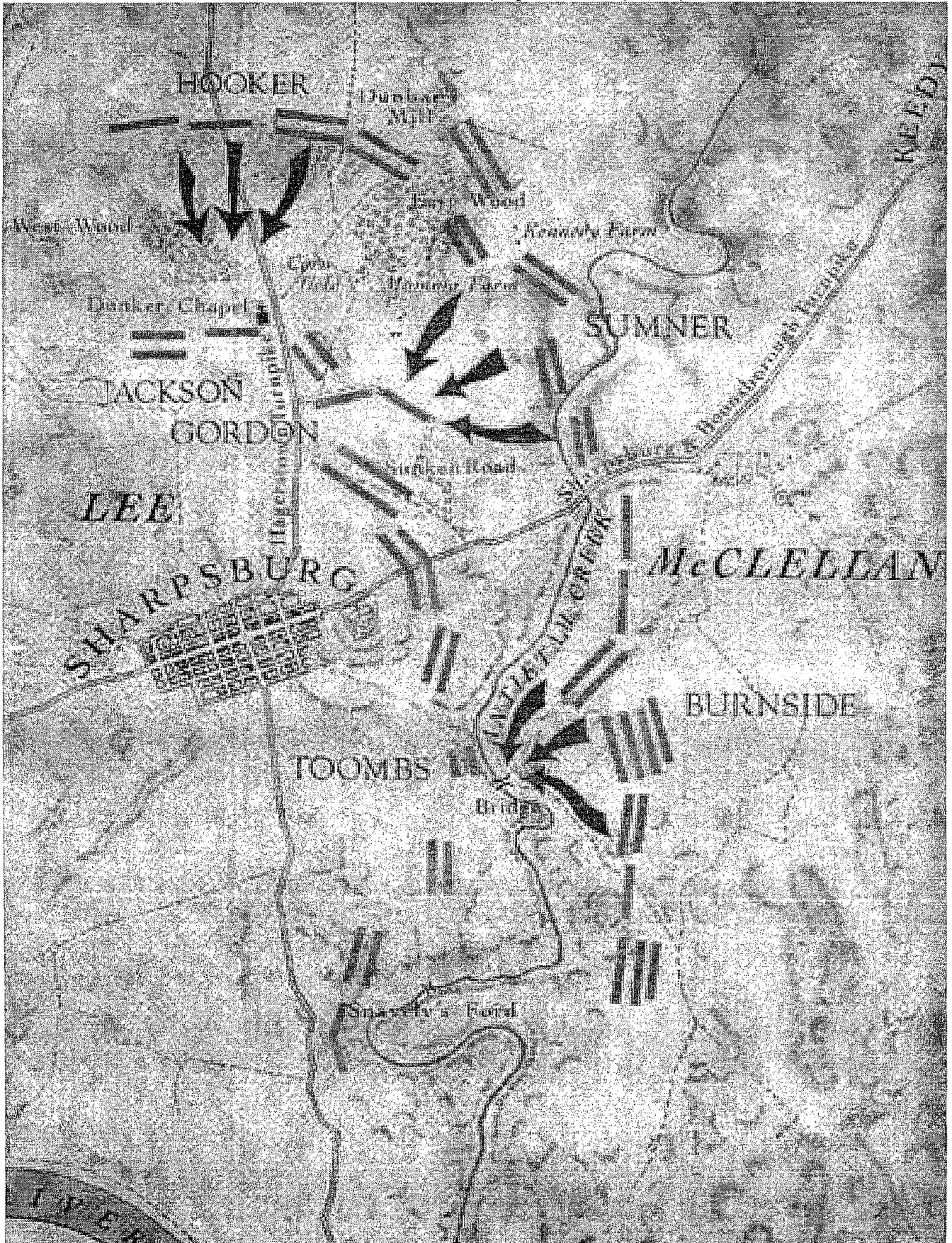
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Appendix A

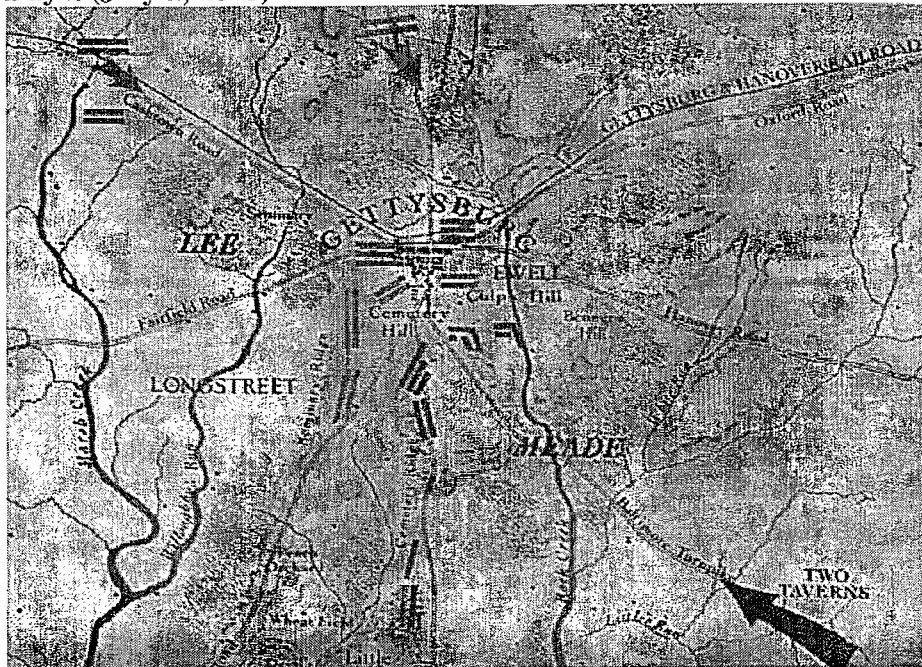
The Battle of Antietam (September 17, 1862)



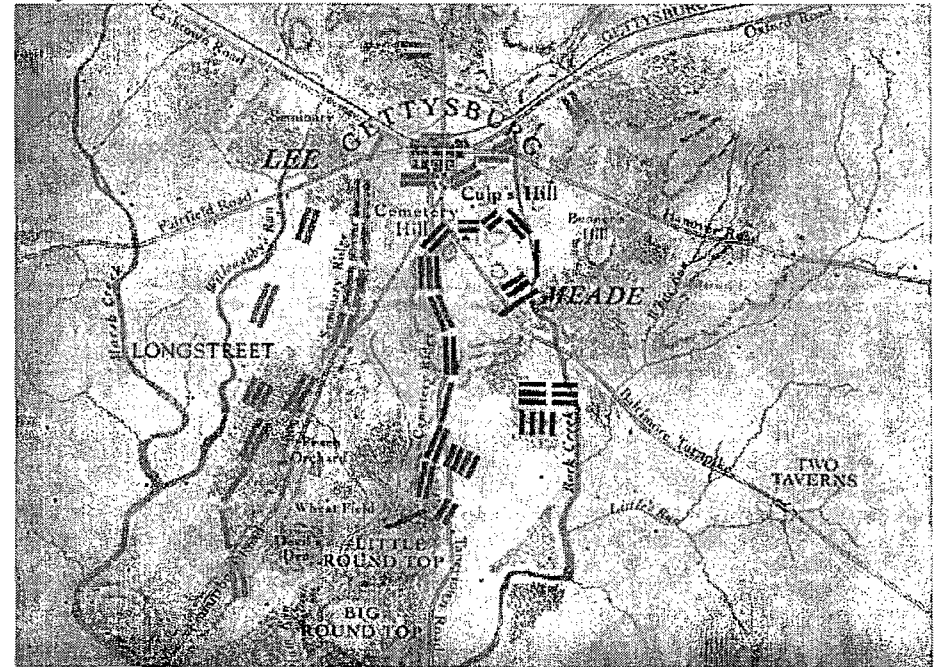


Appendix B  
The Battle of Gettysburg (July 1-3, 1863)

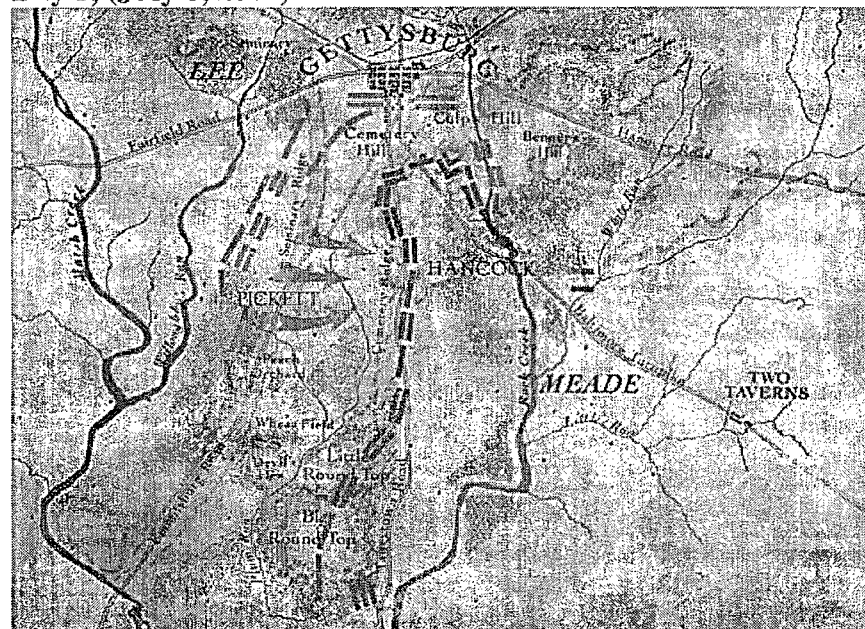
Day 1 (July 1, 1863)



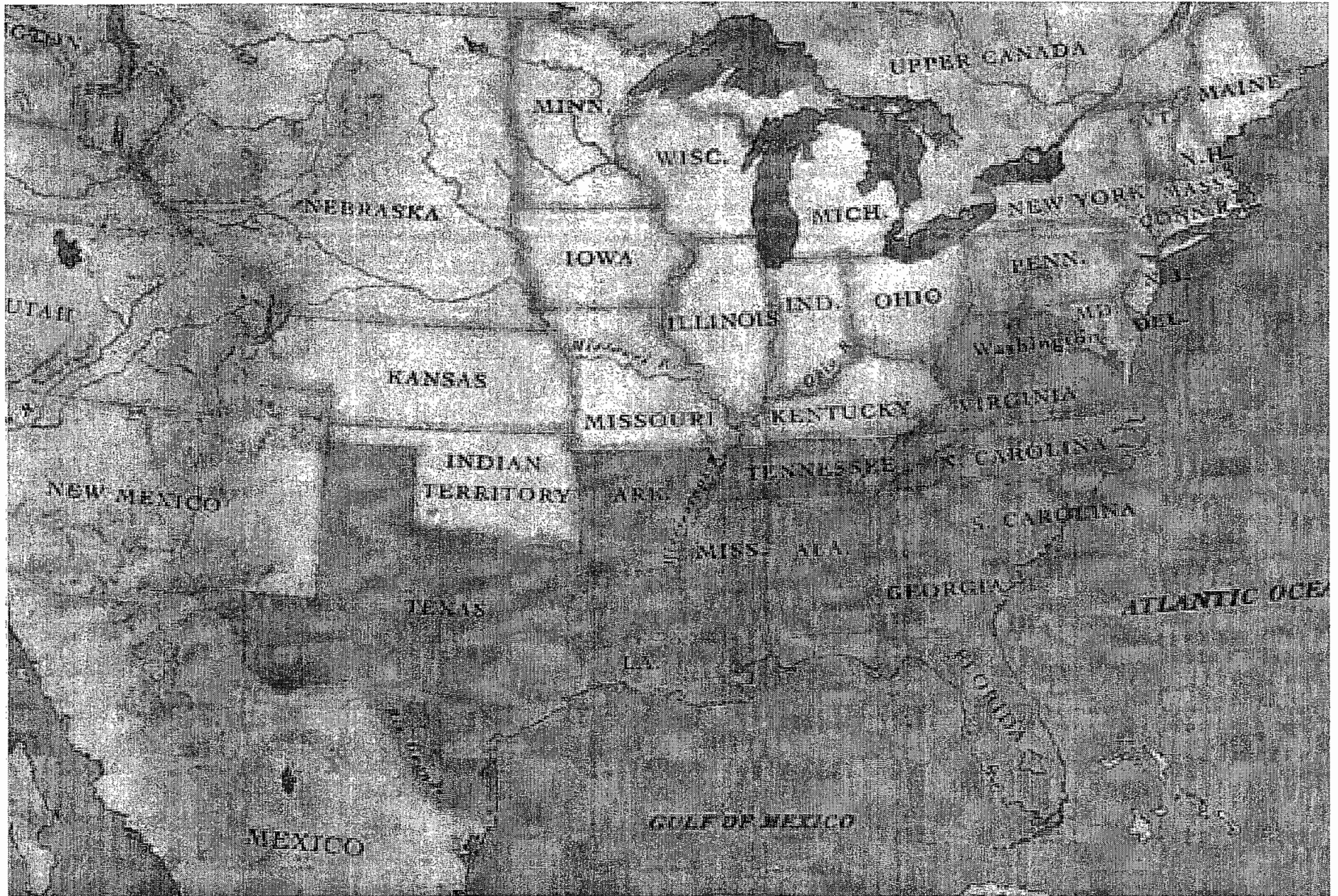
Day 2 (July 2, 1863)



Day 3, (July 3, 1863)



Appendix C  
The Confederate States of America



Public Broadcasting Service, Ken Burns on PBS, *The Confederate States of America*, <http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/war/map1.html#>